

## Family Background and the Meanings of Economic Autonomy for Black Lesbian Women<sup>1</sup>

Mignon R. Moore

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I grew up watching the power dynamic between my parents, and my mom—I think a lot of the reason she stayed in the relationship so long was that she didn't have economic power at all, and it's hard to leave a situation like that. You think you may become homeless or you may become this or that. So I've always felt, even when I was dating guys, that I would have to have my own bank account. We could work out the expenses and all that other stuff but I've got to be self-sufficient. And I'm still like that. I've got to be self-sufficient.

—Lynne Witherspoon,<sup>2</sup> attorney

I love [my partner] to death and trust her more than any female I've ever known. [But] she ain't getting my check; you know what I'm sayin'? And I don't want her check. You work for your money. As long as you take care of responsibilities we got in the house, I don't care what you do with your money.

—Carlie Lewis, croupier (casino card dealer)  
and hairstylist

In this work I examine the ways Black sexual minority women evaluate concepts of equality in their relationships. Past studies of lesbian households, drawing from feminist sociological theory, have emphasized the egalitarian nature of these couples *vis-a-vis* their division of family labor, which concerned chores such as cooking and cleaning, as well as care and supervision of children. But a Black feminist approach would necessarily analyze another aspect of egalitarianism: how lesbian couples distribute paid work, evaluate its importance in the relationship, and construct ideologies about self-sufficiency and autonomy. This is because regardless of sexuality, the home life of Black women has historically incorporated these behaviors and values into what it means to “take care of home.” For example, Donna Franklin’s 2015 book shows that throughout time, Black heterosexually married women have been particularly involved in the economic sphere of home life, offering greater financial contributions to their families relative to their white counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Looking at these dynamics from the perspective of Black women’s histories and experiences brings

new ways for other family sociologists to understand household and marital relationships.

I have spent the better part of my career attempting to build a foundation of sociological research on the study of Black lesbian life and identity, with the intersection of race, gender, and class as the paradigmatic lens through which to analyze this population. That climb has come with certain risks that I have resolutely accepted because I believe that research on marginalized populations is essential to transform our discipline, and the best way to answer the research questions I have is through a Black feminist framework. In this chapter, I examine how family background influences the meanings of economic independence for Black sexual minority women. Collins' "power of self-definition"<sup>4</sup> is a neat scaffold for this work, uncovering the family as an institutional site where Black queer women employ self-definitions drawn from their structural locations and personal backgrounds to manage expectations in their unions. This course allows an expanded set of processes and interpretations about marital power to emerge, as I show in my 2008 paper on power in Black lesbian households.<sup>5</sup>

Black lesbians are an important population for studying family dynamics in same-sex relationships because historically they developed a sexual minority culture outside of lesbian-feminism. While white women largely came to understand their sexuality in the context of consciousness-raising meetings in the women's movement or gender studies classes on college campuses, racial segregation limited Black women's involvements in these groups. Instead, Black women were entering the lesbian world in predominantly Black social environments. Anita Cornwall's 1983 memoir and Abdulahad and colleagues' reflections on feminist organizing both reveal that these spaces were politically distant from lesbian-feminist ideals and influenced whether and in what form egalitarian ideologies would be expressed.<sup>6</sup> The analysis of household organization and feminist ideologies among Black women in same-sex unions allows for a study of these social processes through the lives of individuals who lie at the intersection of the single dimensions of race, gender, and sexuality. I would like others to see this work as part of a Black feminist corrective to academic scholarship.

### **Egalitarian Ideologies in Black Lesbian Marital Relationships**

As part of my research, I conducted interviews and surveys with approximately 100 women who have formed families as lesbian, gay, bisexual, in the Life, or Women-Loving-Women.<sup>7</sup> The majority of my respondents professed views that are consistent with traditional measures of equality in relationships: 84 percent agreed that both mates should divide household tasks evenly, 89 percent agreed that both partners' career plans should be equally considered when making decisions about where to live, and

84 percent disagreed with the specialization model of one person taking on the major financial responsibility and the other person primarily caring for the home.

Despite their ideological support of these egalitarian principles, the data could suggest that respondents tend not to behave in egalitarian ways because in most households, one person spends much more time performing household chores. However, while this is sometimes a source of frustration for the partner who does more housework, it is not the primary source of conflict in their relationships, it is not the primary measure of whether respondents believe their relationships to be fair, and it is not related to the balance of power in the home. Instead, respondents place a premium on *economic independence* rather than the division of family labor as a value and behavior that is critical for marital satisfaction. This importance is expressed through the belief that each partner should contribute her own financial resources to the household.

In *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships and Motherhood among Black Women*, I argue that this aspect of egalitarianism is critical to the ways Black lesbians measure relationship satisfaction and is connected to Black feminist histories and ideologies.<sup>8</sup> But in this chapter, I look at differences in class backgrounds and experiences to explain why financial autonomy is so important for Black women. In my sample, one-third of the respondents grew up in poverty, a third were raised in working-class families, and a third lived in middle-class or upper-middle-class households in childhood. While almost everyone placed a high value on economic independence, I found important differences related to family socioeconomic status that explain why self-sufficiency is so highly valued in their intimate relationships.

### **Low-Income Family Background: Economic Independence Tied to Personal Survival and Ability to Move Out of Bad Relationships**

Karen Jabar is a 42-year-old Black American woman and mother of three who left her Muslim husband of 21 years when she came out as gay. Karen is also a child of two alcoholic parents whose addictions resulted in traumatic consequences for everyone in the family. Under conditions of extreme poverty, homelessness, and instability, she and her ten brothers and sisters banded together in the neighborhood to protect one another from the taunting and bullying they received from other children. She states:

My life was rough. We struggled. I would probably say that we were a poor family because I could remember eating sugar sandwiches, things like that. I remember mices and roaches being in the house, taking

care of my brothers and sisters, and not having electricity, or the fact that we would plug in the TV cord or the extension cord into the hallway socket to get light into your apartment; having the door cracked and not really knowing who is coming into the building.

When Karen was 13, her mother killed her father in self-defense during a fight that began after heavy drinking. After that incident, Karen and her siblings were separated from one another and she was sent to a group home for girls. She describes her teenage years as a life of loneliness, vulnerability, and uncertainty about her day-to-day future.

Despite the bleak circumstances of her childhood, Karen has been able to rise above some of the challenges she faced. After several starts and stops, she received a four-year college degree and provides for herself economically. Nevertheless, she says she does not maintain close relationships with her family members, battles depression and low self-esteem, and has a difficult time staying employed. She has held and lost positions in the U.S. Military, various private security firms, and several civil servant jobs.

While a snapshot at time of interview might have indicated a middle-class status (college education and a job as a supervisor for a city agency), I believe that Karen's family background of extreme poverty, her struggle to complete her education, and other factors in her personal life make her quite different from many of the middle-class lesbians usually studied by researchers. These background experiences have influenced many areas of her adult life, including the things she finds important in her intimate relationships. Economic independence, even through a succession of short-term jobs, allows her a measure of control over her own circumstances. Regardless of the financial stability of the women she dates, Karen says she always keeps a job so that she will be able to care for herself and have the resources to leave unhealthy relationships when she is ready to move on. While she has taken on more than her share of the financial expenses with past partners, she expects "equal sharing of all of the family responsibilities" in a serious relationship, and this includes paid work. For Karen, economic self-sufficiency rather than strict equality in the division of household chores carries the most weight in her satisfaction with a mate.

### **Working-Class Family Background: Economic Independence Tied to Childhood Experiences of Work in the Family**

Roberta "Ro" Gaul is a 40-year-old licensed electrician born in Jamaica, West Indies. Throughout her adult life, her intimate relationships have only been with women. Ro and her siblings were raised with their mother,

who was employed as a nurse's aide. Ro lives with her spouse Sifa Brody, and in separate interviews and surveys they both say that Sifa does the majority of the housework and that Ro does not do enough of it. However, they also both report being very satisfied with their union, and that they have equal power in the relationship.

Ro's feelings on the importance of financial independence stem from her own experiences with work as an adolescent. When asked about the qualities she looks for in a mate, she states:

They have to be working because I'm extremely independent, and I believe [that] everybody should work. I grew up as a young child working, and I am still working, so I believe that you must have a job. If it means that the job is paying you enough for you to maintain yourself or your own independence, you have to be working.

While Ro links her opinions about work to her experiences in her family of origin and the necessity of each person's income to the well-being of the household, other working-class women draw on an ideology of independence as a protection against slipping into poverty.

Shelly Jackson is a 38-year-old bus driver. She was raised by her Black American parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, who have all shared a two-family house since her parents married in 1962. She says her father took care of the family financially while her mother was "the homemaker." Prior to entering into a lesbian sexuality, Shelly had been married twice. At the time of interview, she was legally separated but not divorced from her second husband, and living with her children and her female partner Shaunte Austin. She is emphatic that regardless of sexuality, each partner should bring her own resources to a relationship, saying "I don't give a damn who you're with, you always need . . . to be independent and take care of yourself." She tells me she learned the importance of self-sufficiency by watching her father provide for the family:

My father was always there to take care and provide for us, and that's what made me who I am today. 'Cause even when I was married, I always took that role of being the provider. I was always the one to go out there and work and pay the rent, and pay the bills, and do this and do that, and not look for him to take care of me. I've seen what my mother went through and that's not what I wanted to go through growing up, being an adult.

Interestingly, she defines a "provider" as someone who can take care of themselves without the help of others. Shelly's first marriage was tumultuous largely because of an abusive husband. After five years of kicking him out of the house and then letting him back in, she ended the relationship.

In Pepper Schwartz's 1994 study of egalitarian heterosexual marriages, she defines the provider role or provider complex as a combination of roles that gives one person the responsibility for financially supporting the family, and the other person responsibility for all of the auxiliary duties that allow the first person to devote themselves to their work.<sup>9</sup> Schwartz's definition is different from the way Shelly Jackson uses the term provider, and this becomes clear as Shelly describes the financial contributions she expects from her mate. On separate surveys, Shelly and Shaunte each report that Shaunte spends more time on household chores and takes on much of the childcare responsibilities. Shelly often works the night shift or double shifts, and relies on Shaunte to feed and bathe the children, help them with their homework, and keep the house tidy. However, when asked how happy she is with the way she and her mate divide household responsibilities, Shelly says she became much happier once Shaunte found a job:

Don't get me wrong. She [Shaunte] has always been so good to me as far as helping me out with the kids, 'cause my hours [at work] is crazy and Shaunte is somebody I could depend on. But it was hard when she wasn't working. She wasn't having no income coming in, and I was like, "I'm not your sugar mama!"

Shelly's comment draws on negative images of a woman's dependence on a male "sugar daddy" and simultaneously emphasizes her expectation that her partner will contribute economically to the family. However, she has also prepared to provide for herself and her children in the event that her mate cannot or will not contribute her share, or if their relationship ends. For working-class lesbians raising families, economic independence provides a financial and psychological barrier against a step backward into poverty.

### **Middle-Class Family Background: Economic Independence Tied to Upward Mobility and Self-Actualization**

Renee Martin is a physician. She grew up with her parents and younger sister in a middle-class neighborhood that bordered two racially segregated areas of a Southern city. One might characterize Renee's family background as upper-middle class. Her father was one of the first African Americans in their state to receive a doctorate in chemical engineering. After having two children, Renee's mother continued to work as a college professor until her retirement. Although her father earned more, Renee saw her mother thrive in a middle-class occupation that was personally fulfilling.

Renee owns her own home, has considerable authority at work, and is advancing steadily in her career. Renee's wife Naja Rhodes is ten years

younger and holds a master's degree. They report spending similar amounts of time on household chores, though Renee tends to perform more of the stereotypically male tasks like yardwork, household repairs, and taking out the trash. Both say they are satisfied with the way they organize their household responsibilities and have equal power in the relationship. Renee's discussion of economic independence does not mention financial survival or a worry about being able to provide for herself in the absence of an employed partner. These issues are not part of her current life nor are they part of her past experiences. She could easily take on the traditional provider role in her relationship, relieving Naja from any obligation to contribute financially to the household.

Instead, Renee's discussion of marital equality involves ways of helping her spouse advance and find fulfillment in her own career. Renee encourages Naja to own her own property and has shown her how to build wealth. When talking about Naja, Renee makes reference to the independence her mother has always had from her father's income. She is proud of the fact that her mother has always maintained her own financial accounts and used her income to create a mutual interdependence in her marriage. In turn, Renee wants to help her own wife achieve these things.

The structure and functioning of Renee and Naja's relationship has its parallel in the way Renee's parents organized their marriage, and is described by Bart Landry in his historical research on Black working wives. Landry argues that for the Black middle class, women's paid work was not simply a response to economic circumstances but the fulfillment of women's rights to self-actualization.<sup>10</sup> His evidence lies in the existence of Black women throughout the 20th century who married men who could support them, yet continued to pursue careers throughout their marital lives. For couples like Renee and Naja, egalitarianism is expressed not merely through each person's ability to contribute economic resources, but in the desire of each person to pursue self-fulfillment in the economic sphere.

Katrice Webster is a 36-year-old attorney. She attended Ivy League institutions for college and law school and is employed at a corporate law firm. Katrice was born and raised in a small Midwestern city. Her parents divorced when she was six, and she and her siblings were raised by her mother, who worked her way up from administrative assistant to office manager at her place of employment. After the divorce, the children lived with their mother but spent holidays and vacations with their father who remained nearby. He was a business executive with a much higher income than what her mother earned and continued to contribute financially to their household throughout Katrice's childhood. An extensive extended family also lived in the area and served as an important source of support. Katrice describes her childhood as happy.

When asked about the qualities she looks for in a mate, she states, "They just have to have a drive and want to be successful at something. If they

own their own house-cleaning business, they just have to run it well.” Her partner Caroline Tate is a self-employed makeup artist. Caroline and Katrice each pay their own bills but Katrice pays for a greater portion of the family’s expenses and is the sole owner of their co-op apartment. Caroline is the biological mother of their 17-year-old daughter, who was born in a prior heterosexual relationship. They pay for house-cleaning services, though Caroline still spends more time each week on other chores like cooking and laundry. They report some disagreement over parenting and discipline, but do not raise the issue of housework as a problem in the relationship. Katrice would like her partner to become more financially stable and learn about different methods of building assets. She says, “I try to encourage her to save because I always like to think everybody needs to have a nest egg for a rainy day.” Promoting self-sufficiency in her partner will not improve Katrice’s economic standing, but is a way to uplift her mate and help her become more stable for her own personal gain.

Among the Black women I study, it is uncommon to have parents whose lives represented the traditional patriarchal relationship that white feminist ideologies attempt to dismantle. Mothers and fathers tended to work (when they could find employment), and many households did not contain two married biological parents for a person’s entire childhood. Just 36 percent of respondents were raised with two married biological parents, and very few reported having a stay-at-home mother. Forty-four percent grew up in single-mother households, and 42 percent of these single-parent families were multi-generational and included a grandparent or other adult female relative. Fourteen percent of women were not raised with any biological parents, and grew up in households with their grandparents or nonrelatives. These experiences suggest that the Black heterosexual family, in all of its varied forms, has been the dominant model for expectations African American lesbian women have in the creation of their own families.

### **Linking the Experiences of African American Women to Black Feminist Principles of Equality**

Employing a Black feminist perspective to frame this research reveals that the ways Black lesbians think about partner responsibilities in their relationships are influenced by the social and economic conditions in which they were raised. Like lesbians in previous studies, the women here ideologically support the equal division of paid work and housework, but unlike in other work, they emphasize the importance of economic independence in their relationships. I tie this to how they understand their positions in families. They do not necessarily draw from lesbian feminist ideologies to organize their relationships, and insights from Black feminist thought can shed light on the reasons for this distance. Documents such as “A Black Feminist Statement,” published by the Combahee River



Collective in 1983, or historical research on Black feminist ideology such as the important 1988 paper by Deborah King, reveal that the equal division of housework, childcare, and market labor in heterosexual relationships was never a dominant component of Black feminist frameworks.<sup>11</sup> This type of egalitarianism was important to Black feminists, but unlike white feminists who saw inequality as rooted in relationships between women and men in home life and in economic life, Black women concentrated their platform on how to reduce the gender inequality they believed was connected to other inequalities based on race and socioeconomic disadvantage.<sup>12</sup> They saw their own financial contributions as critical for their families to survive and thrive in a racially hostile world.

Applying a Black feminist lens to answer the research questions in this work reveals family background as an important pathway shaping the beliefs and experiences that Black women bring to their lesbian relationships. This work is an example of how an intersectional, Black feminist approach to theory, study design, and sociological analysis can offer greater complexity to our broader understandings of social life. Black feminist theory is not merely about “telling our truths” for their own sake. It can be used to shift the lens on what we study and how we study it; to produce new and more complete ways of understanding existing theories and processes; and to transform academic scholarship, which has always been a primary goal at the root of Black feminist thought.

## Notes

1. Portions of this chapter were originally published in *Families as They Really Are*, edited by Barbara Risman. 2010. W. W. Norton.
2. All names are pseudonyms.
3. Donna Franklin. 2015. *Ensuring Inequality: The Structural Transformation of the African American Family*. New York: Oxford University Press.
4. Patricia Hill Collins. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: HarperCollins.
5. Mignon R. Moore. 2008. “Gendered Power Relations among Women: A Study of Household Decision-Making in Black, Lesbian Stepfamilies.” *American Sociological Review* 73: 335–356.
6. Tania Abdulahad, Gwendolyn Rogers, Barbara Smith, and Jameelah Waheed. 1983. “Black Lesbian/Feminist Organizing: A Conversation.” In *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by B. Smith, 293–319. New York: Kitchen Table Press; Anita Cornwell. 1983. *The Black Lesbian in White America*. Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press.
7. For details about the framework and sample for the larger study, see Mignon R. Moore. 2011. *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships and Motherhood among Black Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
8. Moore 2011.
9. Pepper Schwartz. 1994. *Peer Marriages: How Love Between Equals Really Works*. New York: Free Press.
10. Bart Landry. 2000. *Black Working Wives: Pioneers of the American Family Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

11. Combahee River Collective. 1983. "A Black Feminist Statement." In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 232–240. New York: New Press; Deborah King. 1988. "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14(1): 42–72.
12. Franklin 2015.

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